

# Diets are part of solving health and environmental challenges

– new nutrition recommendations support sustainability transition



POLICY BRIEF 1/2024



## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The upcoming national nutrition recommendations form the basis for a sustainable food and nutrition policy.
2. Dietary changes are supported by a wide range of instruments.
3. Nutrition is monitored in all population groups.

### Authors:

**Niina Kaartinen**, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL)

**Laura Paalanen**, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL)

**Sari Bäck**, University of Helsinki

**Teea Kortetmäki**, University of Jyväskylä

**Marjukka Lamminen**, University of Helsinki

**Mirkka Maukonen**, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL)

**Satu Männistö**, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL)

**Laura Sares-Jäske**, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL)

**Marjatta Selänniemi**, E2 Research

**Minna Kaljonen**, Finnish Environment Institute

**Anne-Maria Pajari**, University of Helsinki

**Diets must change to promote the health and well-being of the population and staying within planetary boundaries. The updated Nordic Nutrition Recommendations take sustainability into account more extensively than before. Based on these, the Finnish national nutrition recommendations will be updated to support a sustainable food and nutrition policy that relies on comprehensive nutrition monitoring and versatile food environment steering instruments. The goal is a sustainability transition that is fair to all population groups.**

### Our recommendations for decision-makers, public health advocates and the food sector

#### 1. The upcoming national nutrition recommendations form the basis for a sustainable food and nutrition policy

In addition to health aspects, the Nordic Nutrition Recommendations published in June 2023 integrate sustainability to the recommendations more extensively than before. Finland is preparing new national nutrition recommendations based on the Nordic recommendations. Food and health sector actors and decision-makers must consider the upcoming national nutrition recommendations to promote public health and environmental sustainability.

#### 2. Dietary changes are supported by a wide range of instruments

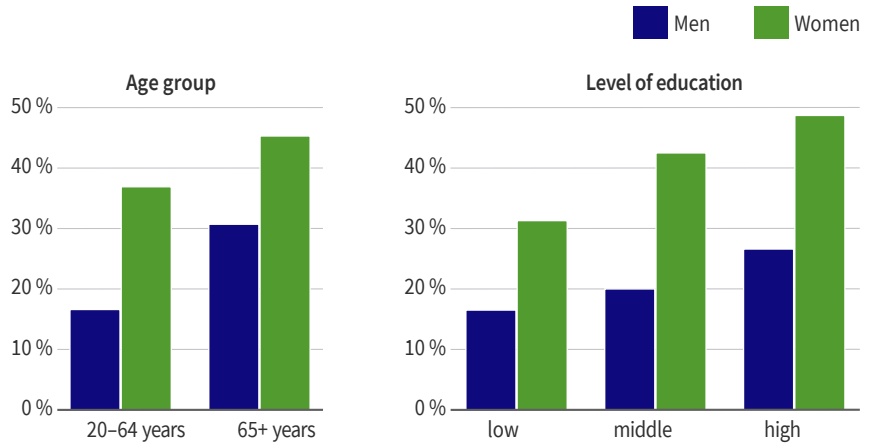
Even moderate dietary changes have significant health and environmental benefits if implemented by the majority of the population. The changes can be supported by a wide range of instruments.

Food education contributes to the development of nutrition-related knowledge and skills, and food services have a central role in promoting healthier and more sustainable food habits to a large part of the population. Food industry and food retailers are needed to steer consumers towards sustainable food choices more firmly than at present. Consumption of healthy and sustainable foods can also be promoted through taxation. In addition, attention must be paid to diversification and positivity when talking about food. A healthy and sustainable diet can be implemented in many ways.

**Vegetable, fruit and berry consumption is insufficient for health and the environment.**

### 3. Nutrition is monitored in all population groups

The transition to healthy and sustainable diets must be fair and feasible for all population groups. Comprehensive national population-level nutrition monitoring, such as information on food consumption and nutrient intake, is needed to select and direct nutrition policy tools. By combining food consumption data with the assessment of environmental impacts, an essential knowledge base is created to promote population health and environmental sustainability.



Source: Healthy Finland Survey 2022, THL.

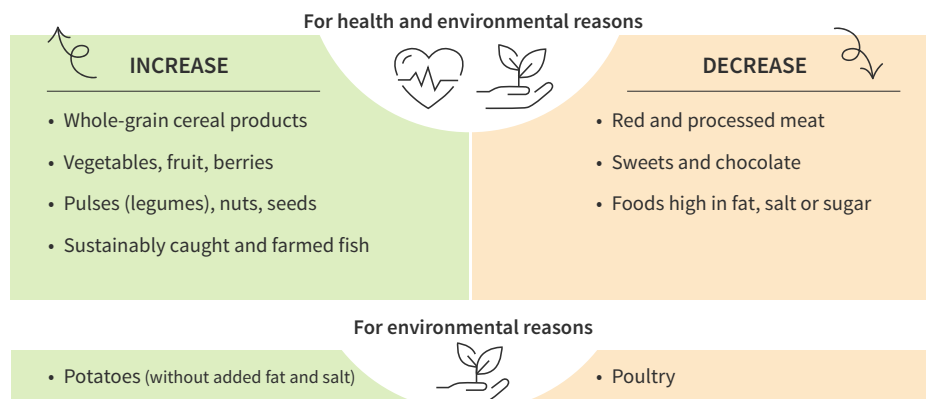
**Figure 1. Proportion of people eating at least once a day vegetables and at least once a day fruits and berries.**

### Toward plant and fish-based diets

The dietary challenges of adults include consuming less vegetables, fruit and berries than recommended and, especially for men, the high consumption of red and processed meat. The diets in Finland are too high in salt and saturated fat and too low in fibre.

It is recommended to eat vegetables, fruit and berries several times a day. Achieving this objective varies according to sex, age and educational level (figure 1). Women are leading the way in moving towards more plant-based diets, but change is necessary in all population groups.

The new Nordic Nutrition Recommendations highlight the importance of plant-based foods in diets. The recommendations encourage moderation in the consumption of meat and dairy products. Pulses (legumes), whole grains, and sustainably caught and farmed fish are good alternatives to meat (figure 2).



Source: Nordic Nutrition Recommendations 2023. Nordic Council of Ministers.

**Figure 2. Toward plant and fish-based diets.**

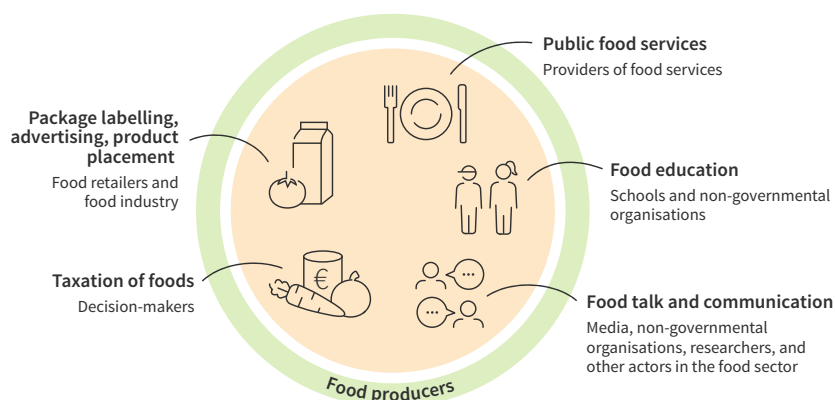
Nutrition plays an important role in the prevention of lifestyle diseases that burden public health and economy. Good nutrition also supports learning, coping at work and the functional capacity of an ageing population.

The food system produces one-third of the global climate impacts and is one of the main causes of the loss of biodiversity.

To promote the health and well-being of the population and to ensure staying within planetary boundaries, it is important to aim at more plant and fish-based diets, as well as to develop the food environment to support better food choices.



**Opportunities for all population groups to shift to healthier and more sustainable diets must be supported.**



Source: Just food and Leg4Life projects funded by the Strategic Research Council of the Academy of Finland, FOOD programme

**Figure 3. Healthy and sustainable nutrition needs us all.**

### Several instruments needed to support dietary change

Public steering of food choices promotes fairness and contributes to preventing the growth of health inequalities. Adopting healthy and sustainable diets requires the involvement of all actors in the food sector. There are many different instruments available for different actors (figure 3).

**Instrument 1:** Strengthening food education in early childhood education and primary schools supports the development of the knowledge and skills of the entire population and helps in preventing health inequalities in the future. The third sector and non-governmental organisations also play an important role in building capacity for change and renewing food culture.

**Instrument 2:** Food habits can be influenced by developing food services. Public food services widely reach Finns of different ages, especially children and young people, whose are especially sensitive to learning new food habits. More attention must be paid to the quality and appreciation of meals in early childhood day care centres and schools, while regarding the views of the users. The task of municipalities and wellbeing services counties is to secure the resources of food services and ensure the professional competence of the staff. Municipal service contracts and food procurement must take nutritional quality and sustainability into account.

**Instrument 3:** Food retailers and food industry could be more active in guiding and supporting consumers to make sustainable and healthy food choices. Product placement, package labelling, advertising and online food stores are all part of a customisable food environment. Nudging is most effective when combined with corporate responsibility strategies or voluntary industry-wide commitments and concrete targets that can be followed.

**Instrument 4:** Decision-makers are responsible for tax policies that should be based on health and environment considerations. Taxation can encourage consumers to eat a healthy and sustainable diet as well as encourage food industry to develop healthier and more environmentally friendly products. Supporting a sustainable diet and responding to changes in demand also requires long-term changes in agricultural policy. This also prompts the renewal of the domestic food production.

**Instrument 5:** The media, non-governmental organisations, experts and researchers, and other actors in the food sector can diversify the way we talk about food as well as increase the appreciation of food. Positive talk about food and reducing confrontations are key to the sustainability transition. It should be emphasised that a healthy, nutritionally adequate and sustainable diet can be composed in many ways.



### Further information:

Niina Kaartinen, Senior Researcher  
Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL)  
tel. +358 29 524 7384  
firstname.lastname@thl.fi

Laura Paalanen, Senior Researcher  
Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL)  
tel. +358 29 524 8816  
firstname.lastname@thl.fi

Minna Kaljonen, Research Professor  
Finnish Environment Institute  
tel. +358 295 251 252  
firstname.lastname@syke.fi

Anne-Maria Pajari, Associate Professor  
University of Helsinki  
tel. +358 29 4158 203  
firstname.lastname@helsinki.fi

## Nutrition and sustainability of diets must be monitored extensively

National nutrition monitoring as well as up-to-date monitoring methods and databases are a prerequisite for assessing the nutritional adequacy of diets and reaching sustainability goals. By monitoring the nutrition of different population groups, necessary actions such as food fortification can be planned and targeted correctly. Nutrition monitoring also serves knowledge-based management and the evaluation of effectiveness of implemented actions.

Nutrition monitoring carried out in Finland is of good quality. In the future, funding for nutrition monitoring must be expanded so that national nutrition monitoring can be continued and extended to cover all age groups.

---

### Literature

Blomhoff R et al. (2023). [Nordic Nutrition Recommendations 2023](#). Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers.

Kaljonen M, Karttunen K, Kortetmäki, T (ed.) (2022). [Reilu ruokamurros. Polkuja kestävään ja oikeudenmukaiseen ruokajärjestelmään](#). Finnish Environment Institute, Helsinki. A just food system transformation. Pathways to a sustainable and fair food system. Reports of the Finnish Environment Institute 38/2022.

The Leg4Life (Legumes for Sustainable Food System and Healthy Life) research project (2023). [Leg4Life project policy recommendations 1: Domestic legumes contribute to a sustainable food system](#).

The Healthy Finland working group (2023). Results of the Healthy Finland 2022–2023 survey. [Website]. Available at: [thl.fi/terveysuomi/tulokset](http://thl.fi/terveysuomi/tulokset). Referenced 18 August 2023.

Valsta L, Kaartinen N, Tapanainen H, Männistö S, Sääksjärvi K (ed.) (2018). [Nutrition in Finland – The National FinDiet 2017 Survey](#). Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL). Report 12/2018.

---

*The projects in the strategic research programmes are funded by the Strategic Research Council (SRC) established within the Research Council of Finland.*



### Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare

PL 30 (Mannerheimintie 166)  
00271 Helsinki  
Tel: +358 29 524 6000  
[thl.fi](http://thl.fi)

ISBN 978-952-408-253-2 (web)  
ISSN 1799-3946 (web)

<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-408-253-2>